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# Tourism as a Development Strategy in Belize, Central America

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## **Abstract**

■ Tourism is an economic activity that influences virtually every corner of the contemporary world. This study focuses on tourism development in Belize where in a short period of time the national government has shifted from virtually ignoring tourism to making it a national priority for economic development. This paper adopts an historical perspective to describe the political economy of tourism development in Belize in the latter half of the twentieth century. It begins by establishing a political economy framework for analyzing tourism development. With this in place, tourism in Belize is discussed through four major stages. The stages primarily reflect the role of the state with respect to tourism, which were in part established based on the attitudes toward tourism, tourism numbers, as well as on the development of tourism infrastructure within the country. In this sense, the paper is seen as a contribution to public policy that sees tourism as one means for economic development, but one that will be reliant on policy and economic initiatives that are external to local communities.

### *Keywords:*

tourism, Belize, economic development, political economy

## **Resumen**

■ El turismo es una actividad económica que influye virtualmente cada rincón del mundo contemporáneo. Este estudio se centra en el desarrollo turístico de Belize donde, en un corto periodo de tiempo, el gobierno nacional ha pasado de ignorar prácticamente el turismo a considerarlo de prioridad nacional para el desarrollo económico. Este artículo adopta una perspectiva histórica para describir la economía política del desarrollo turístico en Belize en la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Empieza por establecer un marco de política económica para analizar el desarrollo turístico. A continuación, se discute el turismo en Belize a través de cuatro etapas principales. Las etapas reflejan básicamente el papel del estado respecto al turismo, establecidas en parte en base a las actitudes frente al turismo, cifras de turismo, así como en el desarrollo de la infraestructura turística dentro del país. En este sentido, el artículo constituye una contribución a la política pública que ve el turismo como un medio para el desarrollo económico, pero dependiente de iniciativas políticas y económicas externas a las comunidades locales.

### *Palabras Clave:*

turismo, Belize, desarrollo económico, economía política

## **Introduction**

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■ As tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world (Seddighi and Theocharous 2003), it is not surprising that state-led tourism promotion is a significant response in creating and diversifying local, and in particular, rural economies and communities. Thus, while political economy would appear to have utility and relevance to tourism-based analyses (Pleurmarom 1994; Milne and Ateljevic 2001), it has unfortunately not been

extensively adopted (Dieke 1994; Fleischer and Felsentstein 2000). Using Belize as a case example, the purpose of the research reported on in this paper is to describe the specific role the state plays in fostering (or not) tourism development. The theoretical foundation is political economy, particularly in illustrating the roles of both party platform and state policy in developing tourism. To capture these roles, an historical approach is adopted

to acknowledge distinct phases of tourism development in Belize, which were based on shifts in political, and with it financial, support for fostering the sector. The time period for analysis is 1970 to 2004. The particular research questions developed to address the above-stated purpose are: 1) How has tourism been portrayed in political party platforms and manifestos in Belize; 2) What development policies have different governments in Belize developed to foster tourism development; 3) How has the level of tourism changed with respect to other economic sectors in Belize.

Fieldwork for the research was conducted at three points in time: 1969, 1980 and 2004. Two primary research methods were employed in the Belize fieldwork. The first included archival and library research. In addition to examining historical records and the popular media, political manifestos and official government publications were analyzed. The latter include *The New Belize*, published from 1971 to 1987 and the renamed *Belize Today* published from March 1987 to present. These are the official publications of the Belizean Government

Information Service. Second, in each of the three periods of research interviews were conducted with political, policy, academic, and media personnel. Contacts with some of these people were maintained over time, allowing for continuity in the archival research. The paper demonstrates that throughout the history of Belize's independence, tourism has become an increasingly dominant feature in economic development policy. In examining the historical development of tourism in Belize, political economy is referred to within the context of both public policies that guide the sector and the platforms of political parties. More than 20 years ago, Pearce (1984, 303) cautioned that Belize should not "focus its development solely on tourism". This paper illustrates that his words have not been heeded. While much of the recent literature on development in peripheral regions has promoted tourism as part of an overall package to diversify economies (e.g. Sharpley 2002a, 2002b), the Government of Belize now promotes tourism as the key sector of economic growth in the country. In fact, tourism is viewed by the governing political party as the national priority for economic development in Belize.

## **Tourism development and political economy**

■ In order to establish the context for the research, related themes as expressed in the recent tourism literature, need to be highlighted. Much has been written on the limits to (Butler 1996; Buhalis 1999), and sustainability of (Ap and Crompton 1998; Hunter 2002), the sector. The divide between the local and global dimensions inherent to the tourism industry have been of more recent interest (Akpınar 2003; Gordon and Goodall 2000; Teo 2002), including the need to better understand the cultural exchanges (Steiner and Reisinger 2004; Paradis 2002) and impacts (Mbaiwa 2004) that exist as a result of the industry. A particular focus has been placed on tourism as a source for community economic development, especially in the Caribbean where tourism has become a significant contributor to economies (Hunter 1995; Moscardo 1998). Less attention, however, has been placed on the role of the state in fostering and promoting tourism apart from a few notable exceptions (Pleumarom 1994). Tacit recognition of the relationship between the political and economic dimensions to state functions can also be cited, most notably with respect to development planning (Allmendiger 2002; Burns 2004; Costa 2001) and the creation of business models (Framke 2002; Copp and Ivy 2001; Hohl and Tisdell 1995). In addition, a small number of regional applications of the political economy of tourism exist, including *The Gambia* (Dieke 1994) and the Middle East (Hazbun 2004). The case of Belize that is documented here, however, provides a unique example by documenting state support for tourism through the examination of its political and developmental history.

In a generic sense, a political economy perspective states that, "the political and the economic are irrevocably linked" (Barnes 1994, 447). For the purposes of this paper, political economy refers to the relationship between political and economic powers within a nation state, as well as the input of economic capital external to the state. Specifically, a political economy approach allows for the examination of the influence that political structures and institutions, and external capital, have on the economic direction and development of nations. This paper takes the view that certain economic sectors (e.g. agriculture, tourism) are subject to political and government intervention more than others (e.g. manufacturing; retail). This intervention includes local, state, national, and international dimensions, all of which have changed in significance over time.

Recent applications of political economy in rural contexts have been imbedded in post-modern, and even post-productivist, interpretations of restructuring (Essex, Gilg and Yarwood 2005). While articulating the details of these interpretations is not the purpose of this paper - in fact the topic is treated in greater detail elsewhere (e.g. Murdoch and Pratt 1993; Ilbery and Bowler 1998) -- it does argue that there are opportunities to build on existing models by incorporating political economy perspectives into tourism development analysis. First, tourism is a post-productivist replacement to traditional, often resource-based rural economies. Second, given the high levels of state support for the marketing, pro-

motion, and development of tourism products by various levels of government, it is argued that political manifestos, policy formulation and economic development are

inextricably linked. Third, as stated earlier, Belize has recently pursued tourism as a national priority in its economic goals.

### The geopolitical and tourism context of Belize

■ In outlining a planning context for tourism in Belize more than 20 years ago, Pearce (1984, 303) argued that Belize was at “a crucial stage in its development”. Since that time, successive Belizean governments have aggressively pursued tourism development. This paper focuses on the use of tourism in Belize as a nationally promoted economic development strategy within the overall planning process of the country. A former British colony, British Honduras, renamed Belize in 1973, achieved independence from the United

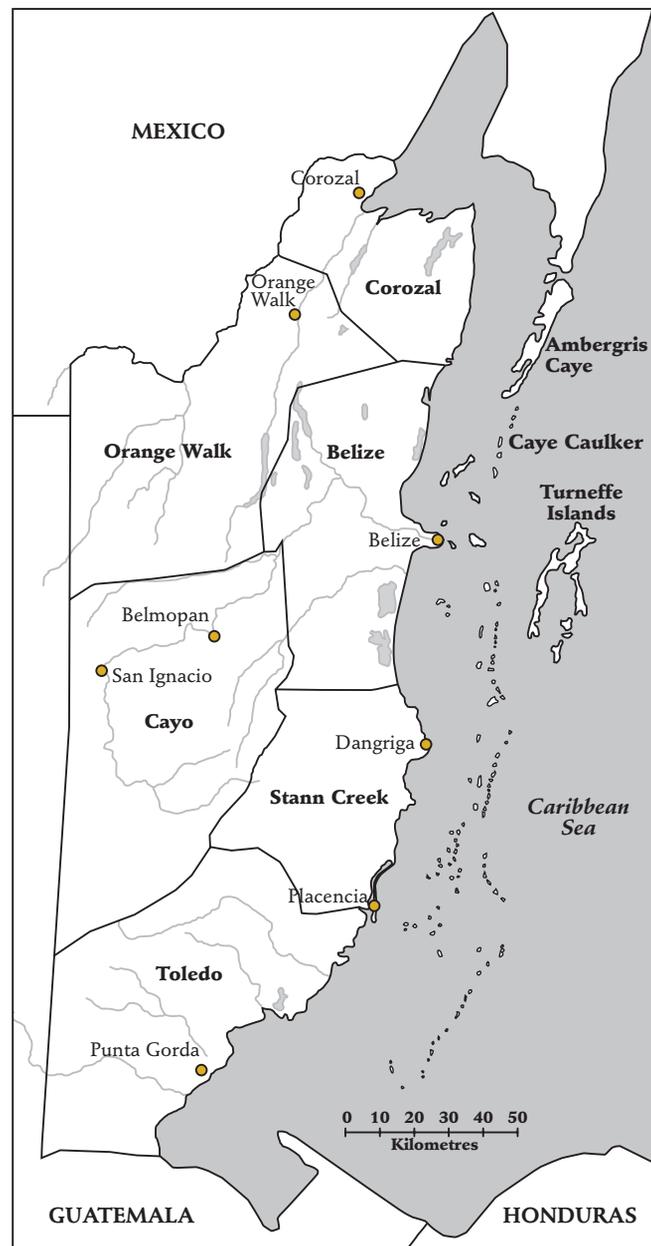
Kingdom 1981. Belize is a parliamentary democracy whose citizens are represented by two major political parties: the People’s United Party (PUP) and the United Democratic Party (UDP). The PUP has been in power for all but 10 years since George Price and the PUP first took office in 1954.

Belize is a small country (8867 square miles/22,966 square kilometres) in Central America (Figure 1), which in 2005 had a population of 291,800. Belize can be considered

**Figure 1. The Location of Belize**



**Figure 2. Map of Belize**



primarily rural apart from Belize City that has a population of 61,000. As illustrated in Figure 2, Belize is divided into six administrative districts: Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize City, Cayo, Stann Creek, and Toledo. Although located on the mainland of the Americas, it often characterises itself as a Caribbean nation, which is a reflection of its historical and cultural background. As the political commentator Emory King once said, “we are in Central America, but we are not of Central America” (King 1977, 2).

An historical approach is adopted to describe the political economy of tourism development beginning prior to Belize’s independence in 1981 until 2004, when tourism

dominated the political manifesto of the ruling party. Four major stages of development of tourism are identified within the context of Belize. The stages reflect primarily the state’s role with respect to tourism and were in part established based on the attitudes toward tourism, tourism numbers, as well as on the tourism infrastructure within the country. Central to each of these stages is the state’s role in fostering tourism development and promotion. Political parties in Belize have gone so far as to include tourism as economic development pillars in their manifestos. Table 1 provides a chronology of selected key events in the political and tourism histories of Belize.

**Table 1. Selected Timelines in Belize’s Recent History**

Date	Political Landmarks	Tourism Landmarks
1954-1984	PUP in power under George Price	Concentration on gaining independence from Britain
1958	NIP founded	Critical of low tourism investment, but little influence and little success
1963	Internal self government	Tourism dominated by “drifters and hippies”
1970	Belmopan becomes Capital City	Tourism Board in Existence, but no statutory powers
1971	<i>The New Belize</i> begins publication	Only about \$10 million in tourist revenues
1973	British Honduras Renamed Belize UDP founded	PUP concerned with Independence and Guatemalan claims
1981	Belize Achieves Independence	Guatemalan question still dominating politics and stalling tourism initiatives. Felt to “madness to open floodgates to mass tourism”.
1984	First General Election, UDP replaces PUP	Promote improvements in tourism which becomes a top development priority. Regular articles in <i>The New Belize</i> . Not to be a “Cancun” or an “Ocho Rios”. But Cruise ships promoted. Tourism receives Deputy Minister Status.
1987	<i>The New Belize</i> renamed <i>Belize Today</i>	No significant changes in format. Tourism articles continued in <i>Belize Today</i> . Tourism industry becomes second priority of government.
1989	PUP wins government	Convention hotel opened in 1991. Belize becoming a “media darling”.
1993	UDP wins government	Tourism is prominent in agenda. 110,000 tourists in Belize
1998	PUP wins government	Tourism dominates agenda. Cruise ship dock built in 2001.
2003	PUP wins re-election	Tourism is national priority and “single largest foreign exchange earner”. PUP Manifesto states “only the PUP has made tourism the heart of the new economy”.

**Pre-tourism to 1970**

■ Phillips (1994, 6) has suggested that, “for at least the past sixty years Belize has been promoted in one way or another as a wonderful vacation spot.” However, the data on tourism suggests that Aldous Huxley’s (1934, 35)

portrayal of Belize as an “end of the earth” remained characteristic of people’s images of the country until quite recently if they knew of its existence at all. It is likely that the disastrous Hurricane Hattie in 1961 was

the only event that had brought the country into world prominence during this time period. In 1961, fewer than 13,000 tourists visited the country, and by 1970 there were only some 30,000 visits annually (Pearce 1984, 293). With a population of about 90,000 in 1960 and 120,000 in 1970 (Everitt 1986, 83), this number of tourists was quite significant locally. Nonetheless, Caribbean arrivals in 1970 were 4.26 million and World arrivals were 168 million. Clearly Belize was not a major, and arguably not even a minor, player at the global scale (Seward and Spinrad 1982, 8).

The number of tourists in the world has been described as “incredible” and “staggering” (Hall and Page 1999, 1). However, tourists are not evenly distributed around the world, and the Belize of 1970 certainly did not receive a proportionate share based on its population and Caribbean-adjacent location. The reason for lack the of success for tourism at this time can be seen partly as a function of the infancy of the industry as a whole before 1970, partly as a consequence of the lack of knowledge about Belize, and partly as a reflection of the poor infrastructure within Belize at that time. There were few roads, fewer hard-surfaced roads, limited internal air travel, and very few facilities oriented towards the tourist in the 1960s. For instance, there were only a handful of buses in the country, most casual travel being accommodated by freight trucks that carried passengers if they had room. The capital of Belize City (Belmopan became the capital in 1970) had a total of only 66 hotel rooms in 1964 (Palacio 1996, 59), and the six District Capitals had significantly poorer accommodation facilities although, reflecting the shortage of alternative options, these may have been operating at close to capacity (Himan 1970, 63).<sup>1</sup> Tax and other concessions had been available since 1960 for Belizean-based companies, and if granted could be used to “establish” a “hotel or other development enterprise” (British Honduras 1967, 3). But clearly this did not happen to any great extent, and the main opposition party was critical of “the low rate of speed” with which the concessions were granted (Himan 1970, 67).

The Development Finance Corporation was set up in 1961 to “expand and strengthen the economy of British Honduras”, including tourism (British Honduras 1967, no page number). In 1961, a consulting company from New York produced a very positive report with respect to tourism. Concluding that half the trade deficit could be covered by tourism, it included a suggestion for setting up a Statutory Tourist Board, a form of which *was* established in 1968 (Himan 1970, 66). But as Himan (1970, 67) points out, “official government statements and actual government policies with respect to tourism have not always been consistent.” For instance, the Tourist Board set up in 1968 was what Palacio (1996, 59) called a parastatal agency and did not have statutory powers. A

government Development Plan prepared on the basis of a 1963 UN survey also included tourism within its purview. But a 1967 government publication on investment opportunities did not mention tourism outside of the possibility of limited hotel construction (British Honduras 1967). There were about 600 rooms by 1970 (Palacio 1996, 59). As these data indicate, and our key informant interviews confirmed, there was at best an ambivalent view towards tourism within Belize at this time.

This suggests that in addition to the challenges of capitalization there were issues concerning the suitability of tourism, or at least mass tourism, as a development option within the higher levels of government. Although the elected government position favoured the development of tourism, the official opposition, then the National Independence Party (NIP), was critical of low investment levels in the industry. It has been estimated that the NIP probably reflected the attitudes of many people in the business community (Himan 1970, 68-69). At this time the government was in the hands of the People’s United Party (PUP) that under the legendary leadership of George Price had won all national elections from the introduction of adult suffrage in 1954 (and continued to do so until 1984). One of the pillars of Price’s ideology was to gain political independence and to remove all vestiges of British colonialism from Belize, and to encourage local development with some help from outsiders. Forestry, the colonial crop was downplayed, and agriculture, neglected under British rule, was promoted. This was a key change in direction as forestry provided subsistence and commercial opportunities in rural Belize. Tourism development, at this point, was still being viewed suspiciously, especially in light of developments seen elsewhere in the Caribbean, where ‘outsiders’ were dominating the industry, and in some cases owning much of the land and infrastructure. Other government members were sceptical of the long-term economic benefits of tourism, feeling it had been “oversold as a panacea to the nation’s many ills”, and the negative social effects of tourism were also seen as a problem (Himan 1970, 68). As Price was trying to divest Belize of the social inequalities of colonialism, it was unlikely that he would embrace the possible inequalities of tourism (Palacio 1996 ii-iii), despite the official stance of his government. Regardless of Price’s views, neo-colonialism, which can be seen to include tourism, would soon affect most aspects of Belizean economy and society (Everitt 1987a).

Thus, while at this point in Belize’s history tourism development had at best cautious support, tentative steps towards the development and control of tourism were being taken, particularly by the Tourist Board, and as Palacio put it “improvement did take place” (Palacio 1996, 59). Although the Tourist Board was aiming to serve the “ideal” middle class market, “those at the bottom, drifters

and hippies” were still seen as dominant categories of visitor (*The New Belize* 1982, 14). A 1962 report (*Latin American Report* 1962, 16) was perhaps kinder, by characterizing Belize as “ideal for the tourist who wants to avoid the crowds”. The Fort George was the only “first class hotel” cited by the Report, as the Belleview, the only other “acceptable” one, had been destroyed by Hurricane Hattie, and had not been rebuilt by then (*Latin America Report* 1962, 16). An undated (1967) *Latin American Report* published by the International Trade Mart in New

Orleans touted tourism as the biggest “El Dorado” for the then British Honduras (1967, 20). Such propaganda seems to have had little impact, and although tourist numbers did increase in the late 1960s, even in 1971 the tourist industry only earned an estimated Belize \$10.3 million (World Bank 1984, 111). However, the growing awareness of Belize as a potential place for tourism marks the conclusion of this first era and the beginning of the more promising second stage where deliberate and organised developments began to take place.

### Anti-tourism: 1970 to 1985

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■ It was during the 1970s that the awakening of Belize from its colonial slumber began to become more obvious within the cultural landscape. Self-government had arrived in 1964 (full independence was not achieved until 1981), but this political change took some time to be translated

into concrete improvements within the country, with its impact perhaps being most evident in 1970 with the inauguration of the new capital of Belmopan, to replace Belize City administratively -- if not initially in many other ways (Everitt 1984).

### A Platform is Built, 1970 to 1981

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■ From 1970 to 1981, tourism increased considerably: with the number of visitors and length of stay more than doubling -- although the total number of tourists was still at most about 63,000 in 1981. In 1976, tourist earnings had been Belizean \$4.2 million but in 1981 the tourist industry earned an estimated Belizean \$14 million. Hotel room numbers had risen to nearly 1400 in the early 1980s (with about 120 hotels of widely differing qualities), but the official position, although in theory pro-tourism, was still that for “a newlyborn [sic] nation like Belize, with a relatively small population it would ... be madness to open the floodgates of tourism” (*The New Belize* 1982, 14). The government did not want to go the way of some other Caribbean countries (Jamaica was cited by several key informants) “where it is difficult to decide who is in charge of the country – the nationals or the foreigners” (*The New Belize* 1982, 14). Consequently the 1970s, with tourism under the Minister of Trade and Industry, were marked by slow growth that was characterised by the development of small tourist ventures such as craft production and sales (commonly by local street traders who made to order) and small locally owned hotels. The 1976 PUP Manifesto (*Belize: New Nation in Central America*, 1976) recognized the potential of tourism, but emphasised the government’s desire for “planned and orderly development of this industry” (PUP 1976, 24).

and entertainment facilities for the industry as well as the improvement of the domestic transportation system” (*The New Belize* 1980, 7). It was proposed that a study be done on the scope and the scale of the industry. However, the bottom line was that as most Belizeans had little capital to invest, the industry would have little money available to it. However, funds were provided for training people in all levels of the tourist industry (Palacio 1996, 67).

This pattern of development dovetailed with the 1980 Economic Development Plan which outlined a “policy for the orderly and systematic growth of the tourist industry in which Belizeans, as far as possible will maintain control and ownership of facilities and plans will continue” (*The New Belize* 1980, 7). The plan further stated that, “attention will be focused on improving training, hotel

Within the tourist population at this time, there was still an element of ‘transients and hippies’, but the business was becoming increasingly characterised by (more affluent) tourists who went there to get away from tourists. These people, ‘travelers’ as Fussell (1980, 49) has characterised them, carefully avoided any of the trappings of the tourist stereotype and seeking locales and experiences that they perceived to be more authentic than the standard fare. To use Plog’s classic terminology, these tourists were decidedly allocentric (venturer) and did not wish to be confused with the psychocentric (dependable) tourists who frequented such places as Miami Beach and Coney Island (Plog 1974, 2004). Many of these ‘travelers’ or ‘anti-tourists’ suffered from what has been termed “tourist angst ... a gnawing suspicion that after all .... you are still a tourist just like every other tourist ” (Fussell 1980, 49). However, the relatively simple and even primitive infrastructure of Belize at this time meant that such people had little choice but to engage in allocentric behaviour.

Although the facilities for tourists improved during the decade of the 1970s, the comment made by the International Trade Mart (ITM) in New Orleans (one of the gateway cities to Belize) in the late 1960s, that tourism

had “hardly reached infancy status as an industry” (*Latin American Report* 1962, 20), was still believed by many to be the case a decade later. And for many people this was a major attraction of Belize. However, the ITM also opined that Belize would not remain in this category for long. It is clear that by the end of the 1970s, although

tourist facilities were still undeveloped in Belize, as the Acting Chief Information Officer put it, “a platform had been built” (Hall 1980), and on September 21 1981 - Independence Day from the colonial power (Table 1) – the government and the industry were in a position to build a tourist industry on this foundation.

### *Incipient Interest 1981 to 1985*

■ In the 1980s, the Price government still had a cautious policy of ‘testing the waters’, but still appeared to be unsure about “how deep do we go” (*The New Belize* 1982, 14). A 1980 Economic Plan promoted tourism growth, but at the same time urged caution with respect to the “environmental problems” that might result from this growth (Belize, Government of 1980, 39-40). These concerns were reinforced by the ongoing unsettled political situation with Guatemala. The governing People’s United Party (PUP) was aiming for the middle class tourists who are “knocking at the door” and are seen as the “ideal market” (*The New Belize* 1982, 14), but still appeared unprepared to invest a lot of money in the infrastructure of tourism that would appeal to these high-end visitors. There were a handful of more luxurious hideaways than a decade earlier, on the mainland in Corozal, Cayo, and Stann Creek Districts at least, and on Ambergris Caye, but not enough to service the increasing extra-regional demand for such places (Figure 2).

This phase was also characterized by international development assistance, most notably the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which launched the Belize Public Investment Project. A variety of economic sectors were examined through this project, including tourism, housing, deep-sea fishing, agriculture and forestry (Pearce 1984, 293). After independence in 1981 the U.S. Agency for International Development increased its aid twenty-fold which helped to raise the profile of Belize, as did the country’s promotion through the *U.S. Caribbean Basin Recovery Act* (Kyle 1990: 36). A tourist survey was conducted in the early 1980s as part of a ten-year development plan. A campaign for tourism was conducted at the same time in the U.S.A. (funded by hotels, government and airlines – one third each), with the slogan being: “Belize, it’s not for the multitudes – it’s for the many in the search of a private island country paradise” (*The New Belize* 1982, 14). But not a lot was physically accomplished. This was partly a recognition that there were “no plush hotels here” (*The New Belize* 1982, 14), and that there was no intention or capability to build them; but it also still seems to have reflected the philosophical position of the government which was resistant to all forms of neo-colonialism, including TV and mass tourism (Weaver 1993). A U.S. AID report of 1983 suggested that Belize did not have a “good tourist attitude” (Himan 1970, 49).

Certainly the stance towards tourism at this time was not conducive to the mass marketing of the product. Perhaps more importantly, the inaction of the government was a manifestation of the hard realities and challenges faced by the PUP power structure in a newly independent (post 1981) world.

Despite many years of negotiation, the Guatemalan dispute (this country claimed a large part of the territory of Belize) still continued, and this affected all aspects of Belizean life (Young and Young, 1990; Byrd, 1991). In fact Guatemala threatened war after Belize achieved independence in 1981 (Table 1). Britain continued to station troops in Belize as a result, and border clashes still took place. Apart from soaking up time, money, and administrative energy, this international confrontation caused image problems for Belize and suggested safety problems for the tourist. Not surprisingly, tourist arrivals dropped (Belize, Government of 1985, 47). While the dispute was resolved to a large degree by the end of the 1980s, British forces remained in Belize in order to guarantee independence until 1994. A draft settlement of the border dispute was agreed upon in 2002 but has not yet been approved.

Another challenge was that, as noted earlier, the country had, at independence, a major infrastructure problem. This also caused difficulties in uniting the various subcultures into a Belizean nationality, and in justifying the independence of the country from its neighbour. It helps to explain the construction of the new capital of Belmopan that was seen, in part, as a means of unifying the disparate groups within the country (Everitt 1984). Roads were at best poor; many parts of the country could only be reached by boat, especially during the rainy season; electricity supplies were sporadic or non-existent; sewers were non-existent, even in Belize City, until an aid programme from Canada led to changes in the 1980s; there were refugees entering Belize from a number of neighbouring countries (e.g. Guatemala and El Salvador) (Everitt 1987b); agriculture was in turmoil with sugar and banana production in trouble, health care was an ongoing issue; and in addition there was a growing marijuana problem which was to turn into a bigger problem (the country became an entrepôt for cocaine) when the American government aided in the defoliation of the marijuana fields. Even the main airport, located on the outskirts of

Belize City, needed expanding before a significant rise in tourist numbers would be possible. Thus, in addition to impacts of tourism development, broader issues affecting social change were taking place throughout both rural (agriculture) and urban (drug use and infrastructure) Belize. Thus, tourism hovered below the surface of official recognition once again (Fodor's 1982 guide called Belize "The Undiscovered Beauty", cited in Philips 1994, 7), although the Belize Tourist Board drew up a Development Plan and presented it to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Tourism in 1983 (*The New Belize* 1983a, 10). *The New Belize* periodically gave reviews of the economy, but did not mention tourism in 1983 and 1984 (*The New Belize* 1983b, 1984d). *The New Belize* did, in August of 1984 (*The New Belize* 1984b, 8) cite tourism ("specialized tourism") as the fourth major development priority (after agriculture, agro-industry and forestry). However, when the "Government's Record of Achievements ... of The Past Five Years" were reviewed just before the pivotal General Election in December 1984, apart from the construction of a convention hotel in Belmopan, tourism was not mentioned (*The New Belize* 1984a, 9). The World Bank

(1984, 32) stated that "Belize's full potential for tourism is yet to be developed," and fewer than two pages in this 100+ page report were dedicated to the tourist industry. In summary, the report repeated many of the statements made by Himan (1970), indicating the incremental changes that had occurred in the industry.

Arguably, however, going slow had its advantages, and just as arguably, given its desire for locally owned and operated developments, the government had few options. In 1985, *The New Belize* (1985b, 6) suggested that the PUP had given "only lip service to the industry despite its potential for growth". However, by 1985 *The New Belize* was being produced by the newly-elected United Democratic Party (UDP) government. Certainly the paucity of development meant that potential tourism opportunities had not been spoiled and that Belize could learn from the mistakes of others. In opposition, the UDP pointed out that Belize was not Cancún or Ocho Rios. Yet, this was most likely not a bad thing. In fact it was meant as a positive point in that this gave Belize a unique edge.

### Tourism take-off 1985 to 1995

■ One of the 'transients' who had settled in Belize, married a Belizean, and became a Belizean booster was Emory King. In 1986, he wrote, that "our national treasures sleep in the sunshine and contribute little or nothing to either the private sector or the public sector" (King 1986, 110). His feelings, often in conflict in the past with the 'party line' finally coincided with those of the new government. The UDP, a union of three opposition parties, was elected by a landslide in December 1984. The UDP had a pro-west rather than middle-of-the road 'Non-Aligned Movement' stance. Whereas Belize had been a member of the Non-Aligned countries since independence in 1981, this change in government was to influence tourism as well as other aspects of Belizean society (Table 1). The PUP government had worried about focusing too much on tourism. For the UDP, depth did not seem to be such an issue: considerable emphasis was going to be put on the development of the tourist industry, new laws would be introduced to promote its orderly growth, while the integrity of Belizean society and morality would be protected (*The New Belize* 1985b, 6). However, in a redefinition of past policy the solution for the tourist industry was seen to be importing capital by allowing foreign investors to develop in partnership with the Belizean investor. The new Prime Minister who made these remarks saw the tourist industry as "an important part of the solution to the current economic problems", although with the caveat that, "Belizeans must be prepared to be in the forefront of the industry" (*The New Belize* 1985a, 9).

Thus tourism was suddenly being more aggressively promoted by the Belizean government, in what *The New Belize*, which was interestingly still edited by the same Chief Information Officer as under the PUP, termed "a complete about turn from (the position) taken by the previous government" (*The New Belize* 1985b, 6). Although for pessimists, the lack of infrastructure was still seen as a significant problem, "more tourist dollars (were expected to be) floating around in Belize" (*The New Belize* 1985a, 9). However, reflecting the attitudinal change *The New Belize* had a cover story "Tourism: More than Sea and Sun" (*The New Belize* 1985b, 6), which trumpeted the spin-off benefits of tourism while still emphasising the previous government's longstanding concentration of tourism efforts upon the natural and cultural environments. Yet, caution about the scale of tourism promotion remained evident in mid-1986 as captured in the following passage from *The New Belize* (1986, 5), titled "New Thrust for Tourism": In the final analysis, the potential for more growth exists, especially when we marry the unspoiled beauty of our country with traditional friendliness of Belizeans. All indications are that a planned and well executed expansion of our small tourist industry will benefit our economy and our people by bringing more money into circulation, providing jobs for employees, and a greater market for our farmers. It is up to us to make of tourism the kind of service industry that we want, on our own terms and for our greater benefit.

Less than a year later, in March 1987 tourism was highlighted (*Belize Today* 1987a, 4) in the Prime Minister's budget speech as one of the key segments of Belize's economy. Politics aside, however, the tourism policy of the new government can be seen as a change in emphasis rather than a complete about turn in strategy. A study by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) stated, "the previous government virtually frowned on the (tourist) industry, and from all accounts did its utmost to discourage its development" (*The New Belize* 1986, 4). Yet, it did not criticise the direction of the PUP, towards small scale, locally owned 'ecotourism' projects. As has been indicated several times, Belize never tried to market itself as a mass tourism destination, and it maintained this stance under the UDP. A Ramada Inn opened a long awaited convention hotel in July 1991 with "181 luxurious rooms and suites" (Donchev 2004). However, nearly two thirds of the hotels in Belize have ten or fewer rooms, and 90 percent have at most twenty rooms (Belize Tourism Board 2003).

True, tourism was seen as being a major contribution to the economy, and an important way of financing the balance-of-payments deficit, but at the same time "the main thrust in the development of the industry here is to attract special interest groups who are interested in the environment, the wildlife, the flora and fauna" (*The New Belize* 1985b, 6). This is important because for the sustainability of tourism as an industry in countries such as Belize it is critical that cornerstone policies be maintained by successive governments even if they might have different viewpoints. In the years following the UDP electoral breakthrough in 1984, the PUP and the UDP both won power (Table 1). But in many ways the main planks of the country's tourism policy remain quite similar, if not the same. It is a recognition that Belize "could not afford to compete with the established tourist destinations" (*The New Belize* 1985b, 6), but also the recognition that many Belizeans did not want to. Thus Belize would not become "Cancún or an Ocho Rios", albeit for a variety of quite different reasons (*The New Belize* 1985a, 9).

Mainland tourism was now to be stressed to a greater degree, including "ancient maya {sic} temples, our wild life reserves and sanctuaries, the flora and fauna and the varied cultures of the people of Belize" (*The New Belize* 1985a, 9). At the same time tourism was "elevated from the seventh or eighth place position it held in the (PUP) development programme" to "1A" (along with farming and agro-industry) in the (UDP) government's order of priorities (*The New Belize* 1985b, 2 and 6). The Belize Tourism Industry Association saw these developments "as a massive blood transfusion" for tourism (*The New Belize* 1985a, 9). Reinforcing the UDP government's position on tourism, *Belize Today* (1987c, 7) also began a series

on "The Belizean Tourister", in 1987 highlighting "tourist accommodations and attractions around the country" (1987c, 11). In the past an embryonic tourist industry had existed in the cayes, particularly Ambergris and Caye Caulker, which had been promoted as diving destinations since the 1970s (*Belize Today* 1987a; 1987b).

Thus, at this time the UDP was arguing that there was a new direction for tourism, but as indicated above in many ways it was a reinforcement of the previous philosophy of small scale, allocentric, Belizean owned (or partnered) developments. The UDP did not want the industry to expand in such a way that it "would cause social disruption and create out of Belizeans second class citizens" (*The New Belize* 1985a, 9) (Table 1). By 1991, *Belize Today* (the new name for *The New Belize* since March 1987) could quote an International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, which said tourism was playing a major role in the economy "relative to actual growth". It also claimed that in 1991, Belize had "the fastest growing economy in this part of the world" (*Belize Today* 1991, 21). Clearly by the 1990s, Belize needed to "redesign its development priorities in view of the changing world conditions" (Palacio 1993: 11).

By the early 1990s Phillips felt that Belize had "become something of a media darling in the tourism world" (Phillips 1994, 3). It featured on the U.S. show "Sixty Minutes" in 1988 and in *National Geographic* in 1989. The Belize Zoo even found its way into the *Sports Illustrated* 'Swimsuit Edition' in 1992; and the "Reefs and Ruins" featured in *The Atlantic* magazine in the same year (Phillips 1994, 8). As *The New Belize* had suggested in a pre-election 'booster' edition in August 1984, "if the world had any beginnings Belize would certainly be one of them" (*The New Belize* 1984c, 1). On a more negative wavelength, as Phillips (1994, 9) suggested, Belize in the late 1980s might also have been "suddenly awash with ecotourists, escapist, and fortune seekers".

Some of this growth reflected the fact that the tourism industry as a whole was growing. This period coincided with a return to power of the UDP (Table 1). In 1995, there were 567 million world tourist arrivals (3.8 percent more than in 1994). However, other aspects of this growth reflect the fact that Belize was getting better at capturing its share of the market. Even *The New Belize* (under the UDP) admitted that the tourism industry had "come a long way during the past twenty years" (*The New Belize* 1986, 4). In addition to the UDP's new direction, by the early 1990s infrastructure had been improved, by the efforts of both the PUP (1989-1993) and UDP (1993-1998) governments (and aid programmes from overseas, and particularly the United Kingdom, the World Bank and USAID (Agency for International Development), but also the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

New bridges had been built; a new northern highway constructed; improvements made to the Western Highway, the Hummingbird Highway (to Dangriga) and the Southern Highway (south of Dangriga); better airport facilities were constructed and bus systems were improved. Consequently, viable tours were being run to places inland, including various Mayan Ruins. As a result, small inland tourism operations began opening up. In 1993, there were some 110,000 tourists in Belize – not quite double that of a decade before, but still representing a considerable increase (*Belize Magazine* 1993, 8).

One more significant philosophical change was the attempt to initiate a resumption and promotion of cruise ship traffic to Belize (*The New Belize* 1985b, 7). This mode of tourism is controversial for a number of reasons, ranging from ecological (pollution discharges) through economic (does it really contribute much to the local economy) to social (these more psychocentric tourists are not really Belize's 'target population'). The attempt to capture the cruise ship trade had been made before: in 1975 there had been over 3000 cruise ship passengers and in 1976 there had been nearly 9000 cruise ship passengers in Belizean waters. But these arrived in smaller

ships, and were related more to fishing and diving than exploring the inland areas of the country. When they tried to do the latter, they ran into major challenges. For instance, until the 1980s, the inland tourist resources were still poorly developed; even most of the Mayan ruins were not cleared and accessible. In addition, the lack of infrastructure, shortage of services, and the shallow waters offshore that demanded the barging of tourists from the cruise ships to Belize City had meant that cruise ships had not been successful. In 1980, only 23 cruise ship passengers were recorded, and a year later none were recorded (World Bank 1984, 111). The then UDP Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism (again, note the name change) personally went to New York after his appointment in 1985, to arrange for the resumption of cruise ship traffic. In the early 1990s, the numbers ranged from a few hundred to nearly 14,000 (Belize Government 2004; Belize Tourism Board 2004). Successive PUP governments had not invested the scarce capital in order to solve these problems directly in their single term between 1989 and 1993. Rather, improvements that were made were tied to other sectors of the economy. It was some time before the cruise ship industry caught on, however, and even by 1995 it was still quite small.

### Post 1995: Promoting “Mother Nature’s best kept secret” Through “Destination Belize” (Belize Tourism Industry Association 2004).

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■ By 1995, tourist numbers were increasing rapidly, and although data on this rise can be hard to interpret, this increase has continued. Numbers are difficult to compare, particularly over time, but in 1977 there were at most 100,000 international tourist arrivals in Belize. In 1991 there were only 86,856, but this was a more accurate figure as distortions<sup>2</sup> had been removed from these (and subsequent) data. In 1998, there were approximately 186,000 international tourist arrivals in Belize; in 2001 there were 244,000; while 2002 data indicated over 519,000 arrivals. The latter figures include cruise ship passengers (319,690 in 2002), however, many of who may not actually have landed in Belize. One thing is clear: there are a now many more tourists visiting Belize. Prior to 1998 there were only a small number of cruise ship tourists. In 1998, there were 14,183, and in 2000, over 58,000. By 2002, the number of cruise ship passengers exceeded the population of Belize for the first time (Belize Tourism Board 2003, 1). A Cruise Ship Terminal, built by a local investor, but now owned by a foreign multinational corporation, was constructed on the site of the old customs wharf in 2001. In this year, there were 48 cruise ship calls to Belize compared to 200 in 2002. This sector of the industry may be more controversial, but it clearly has a lot of growth potential (Belize Tourism Board 2004; Oxley 2004). As tourism increases, the landscapes of tourism become more developed and more prominent.

For example, the British Honduras of thirty-five years ago had a handful of hotels, mostly of indifferent quality; the Belize of today has 447 hotels, with nearly 5,000 rooms, many of which are of high quality (Belize Tourism Board 2003, 24-25; Belize Tourism Industry Association 2004, 21-22). By the 'mid-noughties' it is at last reasonable to categorise tourist development in Belize using terms such as 'mass tourism'. Certainly the sheer numbers of people will impact at least the rural areas of Belize, where most Belizeans live.

Currently tourism is within the portfolio of the Minister of Tourism and Culture. Although the PUP tourism policies of the past have been criticised, it should be remembered that the party came back into power in 1998, and since that date tourism within Belize has increased substantially (Table 1). The manifesto that led the party into its latest election success in 2003 claimed that “only the PUP has made tourism the heart of the new economy, growing the industry every year and enabling thousands of Belizeans to share in the tourism pie” (PUP 2003, no page number in document).

In promising to “continue the tourism explosion” the manifesto lists a series of promises, which if kept, will certainly improve the infrastructure for tourism (roads, water, airstrips), continue the policy of local ownership

ip of small businesses, and continue to promote tourism that “better protect(s) our natural resources” (PUP 2003, no page number in document). Training programmes were also emphasised, as were cultural tourism, language, sports and music tourism, in an attempt to bring the culture of the Belizean people to the forefront and ensure the participation of Belizeans as much as possible. At the same time, the PUP manifesto suggested that the oppo-

sition “makes wild promises to achieve power and then cuts jobs, stagnates the economy and terrorises the people” (PUP 2003, no page number in document). Clearly the document must be seen as a political one, and only the future will tell whether the PUP has significantly changed its stance towards the industry and now really believes that “Tourism means business for all” (PUP 2003, no page number).

## Conclusions

■ To return to the quote in the introduction of this paper, Pearce (1984, 303) concluded that “tourism will not be the answer to all the future needs of Belize and the country should not focus its development solely on tourism as some Caribbean countries have tried to do.” At present, Belize’s Official Tourism Industry Website ([www.tourismbelize.com](http://www.tourismbelize.com)) states that, “Belize’s vision is to develop the tourism sector as a national priority, with a primary focus on responsible tourism, aimed at marine activities, natural history, and adventure markets.” It goes on to say that: The challenges facing Belize’s tourism industry include the need to strategically develop and upgrade its product, the need to maintain the pristine quality of its environment, the need to market effectively to high potential, high-yield, niche markets, and the need to forge stronger linkages between the public and private sectors, non-governmental organizations and communities around the country.

This paper is an analysis of the growth of, and present status of, the tourist industry in Belize, but it also contributes to a public policy debate within Belize that sees tourism as one means for economic development. It could be argued that Belize has passed through stages of exploration and involvement (pre 1970s and perhaps up to 1981) and is currently in a development stage. As globalization continues and spatial and temporal barriers are lowered or removed, tourism is influencing more places, even those that were until quite recently unfashionable for middle class tourists. But more importantly and especially in countries of the “South”, the development of tourism is increasingly being seen as a confluence of both political and economic influences, as countries try to compete for tourist dollars to balance budgets left in disarray initially by colonial policies and later by independence from the colonial powers. This article suggests that an analysis of tourism in the contemporary world needs to follow a political economy approach which provides great potential for better understanding how

tourism development has been fostered, or not, by various levels of government, in countries like Belize. Such approaches fit well with existing tourism research models, such as Butlers’ (1980) tourist cycle of evolution, planning theory (Almendinger 2002), chaos theory (McKercher 1999), local economic development (Andriotis 2002), and local-global interrelations (Milne and Ateljevic 2001).

This paper demonstrates that there have been tourists and tourism in Belize for several decades, but it is only in the last two that tourism has come to the fore as an engine of economic development. Along with the recognition that tourist development became an economic issue as well as a political issue, came an understanding that tourism in contemporary Belize *has to be seen* in this light. It can only then be understood why Belize, under both major political parties, has opted to build a smaller-scale “locally-oriented” industry, rather than one dominated by a Mexican FONATUR-style development as typified by Cancún, where “transnational forces have reshaped local realities” (Torres and Momsen 2005, 314).

Thus, as Belize has expanded its tourism industry from occasional drifters and hippies to gain a foothold into the mass tourism of the twenty first century, by specializing in eco- (land, water, wildlife) and cultural (particularly Mayan) tourism development, successive governments have ensured that the integrity of the local markets and the quality of life of Belizeans are not negatively affected by these developments. It is only by continuing the symbiosis between the government and the tourist industry that this growth will continue to be environmentally sustainable and economically productive. More generally this insight makes it clear that it is only by understanding the political economy of Belize that we can see how successive Belizean governments, despite their disagreements on many other policies, have built a Belizean tourist industry within a *globalised* tourist world.

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■ Dr. John Everitt is a Professor of human geography with a research and teaching interest in tourism. He has been working at Brandon University for nearly thirty-five years. His interest in Belize dates even farther back to his Master's Thesis that resulted from fieldwork in "British Honduras", as the country was then known, in 1969. At that time tourism was minimal, and travel was by walking, hitchhiking, or freight lorry. He has published on a number of Belizean topics. He has also produced articles on tourism in Manitoba, Mexico (particularly Puerto Vallarta) and, more recently, the British Virgin Islands.

## Contact details:

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